

Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities

Poverty Problems of Ethnic Minorities

Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

Purpose of the Paper

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) made a submission to the Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities on 13 June 2017 listing a number of recommendations to address the poverty problem of ethnic minorities (EMs), particularly the South Asians. This paper sets out additional concerns of the EOC and provides further recommendations, wherever appropriate, for action.

Submissions from the EOC on 13 June 2017

2. In the last submission, the EOC recommended that the Government undertake the following strategies and actions to alleviate the poverty situation of EMs:

- i. Urge large and prominent employers such as the Government itself, public utilities, public transport companies and major public bodies to create more job opportunities for EMs as part of their social responsibility and thereby provide a leading example for others to follow; re-look at their recruitment criteria, especially language requirements; and introduce on-the-job Chinese training as well as training support in English to help EM employees attain essential language proficiency and skill levels for their jobs and career progression;

- ii. Follow up on the motion passed by this Subcommittee on 12 December 2016 that the Education Bureau (EDB) should formulate a set of clear and objective indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework and provide improvement plans; provide teachers with more unified and suitable teaching materials and guidelines; and collect and make public the data relating to non-Chinese speaking students in various primary and secondary schools to ensure follow up studies by various stakeholders; and
- iii. Take effective steps to disseminate information about available financial assistance schemes among EM communities such as providing information in EM languages; and put in place more coordinated and consistent efforts by the EDB and schools to disseminate subsidy information to EM students and parents.

Intergenerational Poverty of EM Families

3. While it can be said that among the older South Asians who came to Hong Kong as adults and who fall under the poverty line, most of them do so due to lack of suitable employment opportunities owing to their low education levels and professional skills. However, it is reasonable to expect that their children, specifically those who are mostly educated in Hong Kong, should be better equipped to have more employment options and therefore rise above the poverty line. When this is not the case, the cycle of poverty will continue. Certain systemic obstacles may prevent children of poor EM families from breaking out of this cycle thus leading to intergenerational poverty.

4. Firstly, education as a way out of poverty may not work the same way for EMs. Data seems to suggest that the prospects for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students pursuing post-secondary education are lower compared to the general population even though it has seen a slight increase over the years. According to EDB's figures, in 2015, only 26.8% of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students who sat for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination met the general entrance requirements of undergraduate programmes, while the same figure for all students in Hong Kong was 35.3%.¹ Of those who met the entrance requirements among NCS students, 66% received admission offers while the same figure for the general student population was higher at 86%. In actual numbers, only 145 NCS students out of a total of 930 NCS secondary students got into post secondary programmes through JUPAS. Even worse, after many years of schooling in Hong Kong, most EM youth only attained limited Chinese language abilities, particularly in reading and writing Chinese. It was well reflected from the EDB's figure that only 97 out of 830 NCS students taking the HKDSE Examination in 2015 sat for the mainstream Chinese Language Examination.

5. Secondly, for most EM youth who do not get into university or other tertiary education, the combined factors of lower Chinese language proficiency and lack of professional qualifications continue to obstruct them from upward progression through employment. Given their disadvantaged position, there is a high tendency for them to end up in jobs that are largely manual and unskilled such as in construction, delivery and catering which are currently more easily available. While these jobs may provide ready employment and financial independence, they are by nature subject to the vagaries of supply and demand

¹ Education Bureau, *Replies to initial written questions raised by Finance Committee Members in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2016-17 (Reply Serial No.: EDB617)*. Retrieved from <http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/about-edb/press/legco/others/16-17%20-%20EDB-2-e1.pdf>

and general economic conditions thereby causing them to be impermanent and unstable. Further, these jobs provide little scope for career advancement. The possibility of skills upgrade, such as in the construction industry, are also limited due to the language barrier as many vocational training courses and trade tests are only offered in Chinese. Therefore, they see little prospect of increase in earnings.

6. Finally, the misconception that having a job provides a way out of poverty for these youth is challenged when these youth get married and become the sole breadwinner of a growing family, particularly among Pakistanis where the women mostly stay at home to take care of their families, which generally tend to be larger. This is when poverty can strike the family with per capita income going down resulting in a repeat of the cycle that their parents went through and thus, intergenerational poverty.

Additional Recommendations from the EOC

Data to Assess Intergenerational Poverty

7. While the Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2014 provides data on the situational poverty of South Asians, what is not available is data to assess intergenerational poverty and thus there is no clear picture on this problem among EMs in Hong Kong. A coordinated effort by the Government including the EDB, Labour Department, Social Welfare Department, etc., is highly recommended to throw light on the following:

- The number of EM students entering the workforce straight after school with a breakdown by industry they enter;

- Indicators to measure and track intergenerational poverty; for example, the use of public assistance by an individual over a length of time BOTH as an adult and as a child; and
- Identification of the most likely reasons and most vulnerable sections of the EM population through the use of statistical tools to establish correlations between poverty and contributing factors.

Post-school Follow-up on Career

8. The EDB and Labour Department should consider coordinating their efforts and existing programmes (e.g. the Multicultural Dream Pursuit Project operated by the Caritas Hong Kong, Youth Employment & Training Programme, etc.) to provide career-counseling and mentoring for vulnerable EM school-leavers, particularly those in poverty, including information on financial assistance for those wishing to study on full time or part time basis. The objective of the service should be, through ongoing guidance, to advance the prospects of school-leavers to acquire professional skills and experience so as to facilitate the best possible pathway to a career that offers growth and stability.

Vocational Training

9. Vocational training courses in more subject areas should be provided in English or with English materials by the Vocational Training Council and Employees Retraining Board so as to increase the professional competence of EMs thereby improving their job prospects.

10. Similarly, the Applied Learning courses available in schools should also be widely available in English. Following some reports of courses in English

being withdrawn due to low enrolment numbers, we urge the EDB to consider lowering the minimum student enrolment numbers for courses in English so as to allow schools to offer them to their EM students. These profession-linked training courses could lead to continuing education and/or better job prospects.

Conclusion

11. In conclusion, while the government provides financial assistance and other services to help the existing poor, efforts should be made concurrently to keep the next generation, many of whom have spent most if not all of their lives in Hong Kong, financially self-reliant and keep them out of poverty. This can only be achieved if they are provided with the necessary skills and education to be gainfully productive in a manner that allows for growth over time. The correct education, including language learning, the right circumstances and motivation to improve their employability and acceptance by a wider range of employers are all necessary to make this possible.

Equal Opportunities Commission

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